

(2)

REMINISCENCES : ARMY MEDICAL SERVICE

BY
SURGEON-MAJOR W. T. BLACK
Army Medical Department (R.)

[Reprinted from the "Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps,
July, 1905]



London
JOHN BALE, SONS & DANIELSSON, LTD.
OXFORD HOUSE
83-91, GREAT TITCHFIELD STREET, OXFORD STREET, W.

—
1905



REMINISCENCES : ARMY MEDICAL SERVICE.

BY SURGEON-MAJOR W. T. BLACK,

Army Medical Department (Retired).

My most useful and pleasant recollections of service in the Army were at the Cape during the time of the Caffir War of 1846 to 1852, in Caffraria and adjacent territories, where I learned to ride, and shoot, and fish for daily existence. These, then, were all necessary accomplishments to active service at that time, in order to supplement the usual beef and biscuit rations, which had to be carried by ox-waggon or mule pannier, according to the wildness of the country.

The climate there admits of outside life all day, and sometimes all night, without the adjuncts of umbrellas and mackintoshes, as at home, and sleep could be had under a bush or a boulder just as well as in a four-poster bed. One also learned how to buy a horse, a cart, a fowling-piece, saddlery, build a grass hut, cook a chop or carbonatchie, make tea and coffee; in fact, more useful arts than ever were taught at college or hospital at home.

One good result of this outdoor life was the improvement of all the physical powers, so that the town and

student constitution was supplemented by new conditions of body ; fatigue was not experienced and marches by day and night were unfelt, and the senses became improved, and particularly the eyesight, which becomes more acute by its varying from mountain-tops to plains, instead of across the street only.

I served in the Caffir Wars with the Rifle Brigade, Cape Mounted Rifles, 2nd Queen's, and 91st Regiments chiefly, which entered into the composition of the columns on the line of march or patrol. I was stationed at several forts, or outposts, during peace time intervening, where I had to visit other neighbouring posts for medical casualties as they occurred, and was always welcomed by the officers for any news and given a "shake-down" and dinner for the night.

Some regiments got into splendid condition for marching and camp life, as the 91st and 73rd Regiments, who could go up hill and down dale with any Highlander, but they were all handicapped by the want of good shooting guns to pot their foes on the hills and in the kloofs, or in the krantzes. The Rifle Brigade was the only regiment that had so-called rifles, and these were only of the belted ball type, which had no long range, being only true within that limit, as the bullet was still spherical and had no snout, but only a ridge round it, which would entail friction in its passage through the air.

A few officers had received rifles, with conical bullets and grooved barrels, and they astonished the Caffirs when they got a pop at them up in some crag, or krantz, across a valley. The Minié Rifle was just then coming into use by private people, but more fully in the Crimean War as the military arm for infantry—as in the Guards.

The wounds made by the old round bullet used by the Caffirs were much bigger than by the rifle, and crushed the bones more, and on the field were only dressed dry, by pad and bandage, till removal to any stationary hospital, where lint and water dressings were applied and changed frequently, but they took a long time to heal. Wounds occurring to men of native corps, Fingoes and Toties, took much less time to heal than those in men of British nationality, probably because their constitutions were uninjured by intemperance, or over-nervous sensibilities of modern life at home.

It was in the Caffir campaigns that first appeared the white cap cover, the patrol jacket, with pockets, the bandolier, the saddle satchel, and the brown boots, the patrol tent, and other substitutes for European home armamentaria. It was found quite possible to live in the open air in all circumstances, like a wild animal, instead of in a modern house, so that great numbers of officers and men never slept in a house for some years till they came to a town or a fort during months of campaigning, marching and patrolling, where the bell tent, or patrol tent, was their only habitation.

Typhoid or infectious fevers were unknown or unrecognised among the troops, as the water in use came from pure mountain sources, as in the highlands, and in constant flow. It is so different from that in the upland plains in the interior, which comes direct from the stagnant pools in the river-courses, which only flow intermittently according to season, and therefore collect animal and vegetable *débris* in them.

My next interesting period of service was in the Crimean War, at the second winter of the campaign, and I was attached to the 50th Regiment, 1st Royal Scots

and Land Transport Corps, in tents, in the 3rd Division in the Highland Brigade, &c., and the hospitals appended were in marquee tents also. The water there was always of a doubtful description, being drawn from wells sunk in the black soil, the *swarte erde* or *melancthons* down to the base rock, and so would be contaminated with superficial leakage. To this cause mainly may be attributed the prevalence of infectious fever in the French lines, and its outbreaks, though less severe, seen in our troops; and there was no river near at hand for drainage or fresh water, as the camps were all on the upland plateau of the Crimea.

One became familiar with the storm blizzard in the winter as it occurs in Canada and Russia, where a large black cloud appears on the northern horizon, gradually nearing and widening, till it overspreads and then bursts into a gale, with driving snow and sleet, covering the ground several inches. One had to visit the hospitals to see that tents were secure, turn out the orderlies to steady poles and hammer in the pegs and sweep up the snow at the tent doors, to give access to the interiors to the sick and wounded.

Bell tents generally for officers and men were then doubled by one being covered over by another, with small space between as the cover bulges, and the ground was dug out three to four feet inside (or "dug outs") and boarded on the floor, and a substantial cot inserted, and table and washstand, &c., for officers. A small stove was also placed inside with iron flue leading into the bank of the "dug out" and into the ditch of the tent outside, with short chimney erected.

As the winter cold was severe, and longer than at home, I found it necessary to put on double dress, and so

habitually wore two jackets, two vests and two trousers, two socks, &c., and found perfect comfort in such in all weathers. Government, besides, supplied extra winter clothing for officers and men, and we had fur jackets and caps, gloves, &c., which were all our needs, but mocassins or fur boots were much wanted by all, as the hospital frequently got frost-bitten cases in for treatment among the troops in the camp.

My most interesting recollections were, however, once a ride through the Crimea into Sebastopol, two days after it surrendered to the assault on September 8th, 1855, by the allied British and French armies, and when it had by that time been deserted by the Russians and not re-occupied by our troops. It was a scene of desolation everywhere, lonely and uninhabited, except by a few Greek hawkers. The buildings were riddled and roofless, but not actually demolished, so the ground floors only were used for occupation.

Open house excavations were filled with dead Russians in their uniforms, piled to the top, and many bodies were lying about the earthworks as they expired from their wounds. A clean sweep had been made of the household goods and the contents inside the rooms, which were empty, as the Russians had been preparing to evacuate the town for weeks beforehand for the north side of the harbour.

The forts, casements and storehouses were, however, in fairly good condition, in spite of the rain of shell and ball, as the stone was peculiarly well adapted to receive them, being penetrable, and probably was some sort of calcareous marl.

The docks were intact then, but afterwards blown in by our engineers, and the Government stores were well

stocked, as they kept them open to the last for their own troops' use.

The lines of earthwork ramparts from the Malakoff to the Redan and on each side were marvels of engineering workmanship, and surpassed our own lines opposite in perfect finish and adaptability, comfortable shelters for the gunners inside, safe underground magazines, ramparts neatly faced with fascines, covered ways from one salient to another, &c.

A really welcome diversion from camp life was a trip after the peace in March, 1856, round the country of the Crimea, undertaken with a party of officers, who took me as their doctor, as soon as the days became longer, in May.

We took a full camp equipment, riding and pack horses, tents, stoves, cooking stoves, bedding, forage, servants, &c., so as to be independent of buying on the road or staying at inns, and were thus enabled to camp anywhere and at any time. We found the Russian, or rather Tartar, inhabitants perfectly civil and obliging, and gave us all we wanted on the road, and there was no boorishness displayed and none given, and so we travelled like in Ireland, over moor and mountain without hindrance, and camped by stream or road without protestation.

We visited the site of the battle of Alma, the new capital, Simpheropol, Bachtshiserai, the old capital, with its palace and mosque, the Jewish city near, and the old synagogue, with the Czar's gifts on its altars, at T'choufut Kaleh. At Simpheropol a Russian laird invited us to camp in his fields and to dine at his house, which was outside the city, like any Scottish chieftain, and said we were friends, as he had nothing to do with the war, which was a Government business.

We ascended Mount Tchatar Dagd and went on to Yalta, on the east coast, when we came into country like the south coast of the Isle of Wight, which the Crimea much resembles altogether. Here we got into modern civilisation, for Yalta is like Ventnor, the place of the tripper, and has hotels; from thence we visited the celebrated palace of Livadia, and the adjoining mansions of royalty, and were shown over its interior, and had a smoke in its superb smoke-room, with its inside walls covered with creeping plants and flowers.

All the coast line of villas was kept intact and unlooted by the patrol of our gunboats night and day, up and down, from the marauding elements of the French and Turkish armies, so there was nothing burnt or destroyed anywhere, as at the Cape. We next visited the great palace of Prince Woronzoff, further on, at Aloushta, and were shown round the richly decorated rooms and over the fine gardens, with the wonderful avenue of grape vines, and here nothing was looted or spoiled, as expected.

Finally, we passed through Aloushta and over the Baidar Hill Pass, into the Tchernaya valley, and so back to camp on the Fedukine heights.

When Surgeon, 2nd Battalion 11th Regiment, Devonshire, curiously, I had service again in South Africa, at Cape Town and in Western Province, chiefly, and renewed my experiences of that salubrious climate in the sixties.

In relation to the late hostilities in South Africa, we saw no sign there of any antagonistic animosity of the Dutch inhabitants towards British anywhere, either this time or when previously among them ten years before. Then I mixed with the frontier Dutch, visited them at their houses and medically attended their families, and went out shooting with them.

This time the regiment was well received everywhere, at headquarters and detachments, and the officers were entertained and visited Dutch houses as well as English and asked to parties, shooting, cricket, &c., by them.

As regimental doctors then existed, we got our share of all the pleasant functions then going on—dinners, receptions, balls, invites, &c., and had full opportunities of leaves from being able to delegate duties without trouble.

In the late sixties the 11th Regiment was sent by troopships to Hong Kong, China, to relieve troops returning home from the long China War, lately brought to an end, but unfortunately fell on unhealthy times, as usually happens after every war. An epidemic of malarial fever, cholera, dysentery and diarrhoea broke out and decimated the regiment, like other troops quartered there and at Shanghai and elsewhere, and the Government were caught napping, and medical staff and supplies were found wanting. Surgeons were got from the Navy, supplies were brought up, fresh houses were hired in the town, ships had to be freighted to take invalids to Japan, the Cape, and home. Though the Suez route was then in full working order, yet the Government sent invalid-laden ships round by the Cape home, then a three months' sailing voyage, and, in consequence of the crowded cooping up below decks, numbers perished, saturated with the effluvia of their sick comrades. Numbers were taken off at the Cape, and fresh doctors and supplies obliged to be shipped in them for the rest of the voyage to England. All these losses much exceeded those by war.

With respect to home service at various garrisons, barracks and camps, there is but little to mention of any

unusual character, beyond the great prevalence of venereal diseases about 1858-1861, which seemed to break out after the return of the troops from the Mutiny in India. The decayed state of many provincial barracks was then quite observable, due partly to slums and factories built up all round them as the towns became populous, and this was the more noticeable as the returned troops had been much better accommodated in cantonments and barracks abroad.

The open military camps at Aldershot, Shorncliffe and Colchester were established about the fifties, with wooden huts for officers and men, the one single and the other company, and then there were no walls or barricades round them, so different from the old castles and the old barracks, which became quite out of date.

They were much appreciated by all, as there was plenty of light and air, and also of weather, but this did not seem to matter much, as the camps were generally healthy, and, what was curious, they were scarcely ever damaged by a big fire raging amongst the huts, as might have been expected in a heterogeneous community.

Regarding some of the affairs I participated in during the Caffir wars, mention may be made of the attack upon Fort Beaufort by Hermanus and his Hottentot commando, where the chief was killed in front of the town while leading his men on.

His body was brought to my hospital and examined, and the funeral took place from it, and it was interred in the town graveyard. I marked the spot in order to do a resurrection some night, but was frustrated by having to leave the place. Somebody afterwards succeeded in it, and secured the head for a collector, and exhibited it.

Another event was an assault and capture of Fort

Armstrong from the rebel Hottentots, under Pockbaas, by our troops under General Somerset, comprising Cape Mounted Rifles, several Artillery, regular regiments and levies, who came in from the Lushington Valley.

A force of Burghers, of Boer and English farmers, also co-operated from the west, under the Pringles and Bowkers, and led with a combined rush on the fort.

The Toties were dislodged from the tower by a daring Royal Artilleryman, who took a live shell in his hand, and crept up to the walls and threw it into a window on the ground floor, where it exploded and drove out the defenders, who then surrendered.

Again, when stationed at Whittlesea, with a garrison of 74th Regiment, levies and Burghers, under Loxton, all commanded by Captain Tylden, Royal Engineers, we witnessed a combined attack on the town by Tambookies, under Mapassa, who came on in skirmishing form on all sides. They failed, however, to get a successful rush, as when they got too near to be pleasant they were received with a telling fusillade from the troops in the fort under shelter, and from the buildings in the outskirts with loop-holed walls.

When at Fort Hare, again, a general attack was made on the cantonment by the combined Caffirs under Sandilla, who skirmished all round the place in daylight, but could not get near our lines on our side, as they were received by volleys from the loop-holed houses of the town of Alice close by, on the other side of the River Chunie.

I participated also in the expedition to the mouth of the Buffalo River, then a wild country, and we located and founded the town of East London, now a great seaport; also in General Cathcart's expedition to the Orange

River country to get terms with Moshesh, the chief of the Basutos tribes, but not without a preliminary fight at the Borea Mountains; also in an expedition under General Somerset across the great Kei River, after fording on horseback a wide stream, against the Gaikas and Galekas under Kreili; and visited Butterworth, a large mission station further up country. Also in an expedition under Colonel Sutton to the Kromme heights to attack the Caffirs under Macomo, located in the Water kloof, who vigorously assaulted the rearguard on its descent in returning home to Yellow-wood camp, when the 74th Regiment withstood a hand-to-hand fight in the bush, with bayonets against assegai.

With Compliments.

Wm. H. Black Em.-YR C.S.P.

Cal. West. Rev. Club.

Grinbaugh